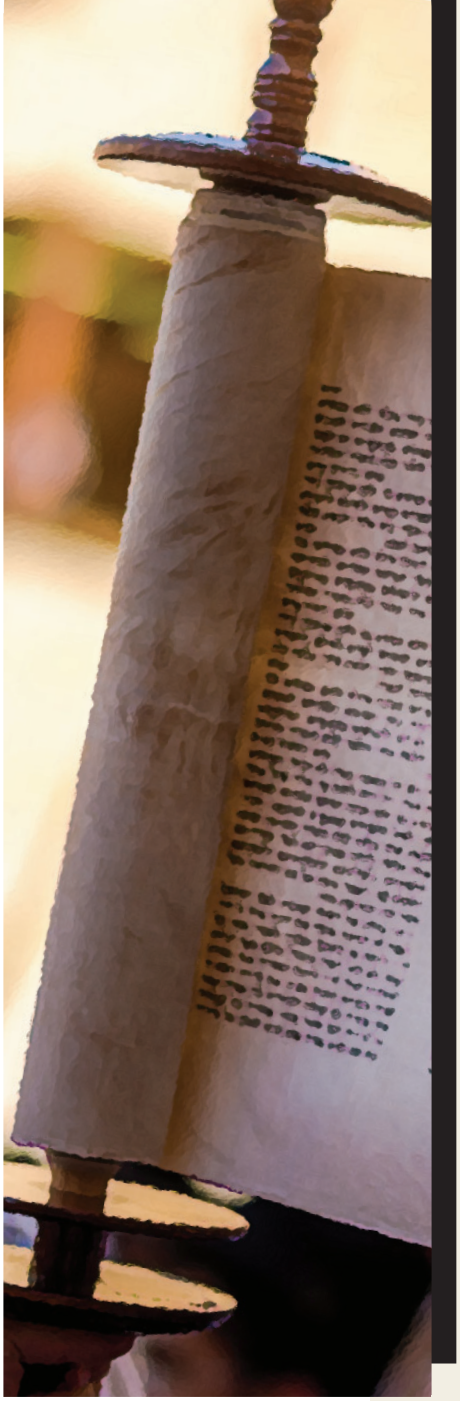


A special thank you to the

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May you be Zoche to much Nachas and Hatzlacha!

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHEN ONLY MOMMY WILL DO

The *pasuk* tells us, "*Vaye'ehav Yitzchak es Eisav, veRivkah oheves es Yaakov*"—Yitzchak loved Eisav, and Rivkah loved Yaakov. In *Imros Tehoros*, the Rachmastrivka Rebbe explains that Yitzchak's love did not come from failing to recognize who Eisav was. Rather, he was teaching future generations that even when a child behaves improperly, a parent must retain love and compassion for him. Through this, Yitzchak sought to awaken Hashem's compassion toward His children, the quality of "*keracheim av al banim*," even when we do not behave as we should.

When we discuss *chinuch habanim*, we are usually discussing what to do when children are not behaving as they should. Of course, *chinuch* means educating and raising children, and there is much to learn and implement even when everything is going well. But it is the difficulties that make us stop, reconsider our methods, and try to understand our children better.

Often, how we respond in those challenging moments is where much of the work of *chinuch* takes place. Learning when to draw a child closer and when to stand firm, while maintaining our love, is central to that work.

With the right thought and patience, and never-ending *siyata d'Shmaya*, we will hopefully be able to achieve the best results and see only *nachas* from our children.

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Parshas
Toldos
VOL. 9 | ISSUE 6

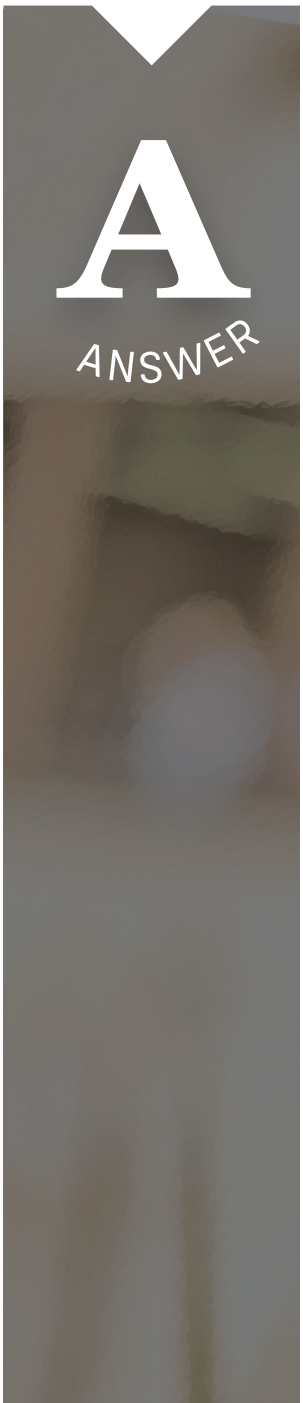


Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thanks so much for the weekly articles and the Yiddish and English weekly classes. I appreciate the balanced and methodical approach to resolving issues. Though you mentioned that you don't typically deal with young children, I thought you still might be able to answer my question.

My three-year-old wakes me up at night to take her to the bathroom. Until what age is it normal to take a child to the bathroom at night? Also, she'll scream if anyone, including my husband, offers to take her to the bathroom. Is there a way to stop that? By the way, she's in the process of going to the bathroom during the day with a sister, and not only me.

Thanks again for all the valuable information I gained from you.



Being woken at night is one difficulty; being the only person your daughter will accept help from is another. I discussed young children's tantrums in previous essays, but your question brings up some points that apply not only to young children. Although a three-year-old's demands may seem far removed from difficulties with a teenager or spouse, there is often something similar about how these situations develop and how we respond. I hope you won't mind if I take this opportunity to address the bigger picture of how this affects other relationships as well.

You ask both whether your daughter's request is normal and whether her insistence on having you take her can change. It's important to note that these are separate questions. Something can be normal without being something you have to keep going along with. The important considerations are what is reasonable, what you are willing to provide, and whether you are making that decision yourself or allowing her reaction to make it for you.

What screaming accomplishes

From your description, I assume that when your daughter screams for you, you eventually take her. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but if that is what happens, the screaming is accomplishing what she wants. From her perspective, why should she stop? This does not require much calculation on her part. She has learned that insisting in this way gets the result she is looking for.

Often, with children and adults alike, something keeps happening because we keep allowing it. It becomes clearer when you notice that the same person who speaks or behaves a certain way toward one person would not do so toward another. Sometimes we feel we have no choice but to tolerate something, or we simply fear what will happen if we stop. Nevertheless, it is worth recognizing what our response is actually allowing to continue.

Everyone has limits, even when they are not immediately apparent. A parent may describe a child who screams, yet would never hit. Another child may hit but would not break something valuable. When I ask about these distinctions, parents often realize that the child does stop somewhere. Consciously or otherwise, the child has learned that certain things will pass and others will not. Sometimes that understanding develops gradually, as an outburst goes further than before and is accepted.

The parent also has limits. Someone may tell me there is nothing they can do about a behavior, yet acknowledge that if it went further, they would have to respond—and they'd find a way to do so too.

The point is to move those limits gradually and reasonably, on both ends, rather than waiting until things become intolerable or otherwise dysfunctional. This is not about winning control; it's simply learning the best ways to express what you can accept and thereby help your child behave appropriately.

As I mentioned, this is not a discussion about children per se. The same pattern can develop between spouses. I'll give a typical yet sad example.

People show me text messages containing hurtful or abusive language, asking me how to respond while adding that they wish this would stop. They don't realize that sometimes they have continued answering as though the language were acceptable, without addressing the language itself. Over time, the sender has become comfortable communicating that way. The way the messages are written needs to be addressed, rather than just answering what they say.

Of course, deciding not to tolerate something needs to be done deliberately and cautiously. An inability to accommodate can create its own difficulties in a relationship. You need to think it through and decide whether you're also willing to deal with what your refusal to tolerate something may cause. That willingness is precisely what makes your decision effective.

You may decide that taking your daughter to the bathroom once during the night is something you are willing to do, or that you are comfortable with her waking you to tell you she is going. The important thing is that you have thought it through, decided what is reasonable, and are ready to follow through. It's important that you do things thoughtfully, in a way you're comfortable with, rather than just tolerating them and feeling controlled.

Making your own decisions isn't only about what you will or won't allow. It also applies when you give something or offer a reward. For example, you might choose to offer a prize for not waking you because you think encouragement would help. That is different from giving a prize because your daughter threatens to wake you unless she receives it. Recently, I suggested that a parent offer an incentive to a son who was finding it difficult to remain in *yeshivah*. Acknowledging his difficulty and offering encouragement was appropriate. Giving him the same thing if he threatened to come home unless his demands were met would teach a very different lesson.

When she isn't happy with your decision

It is important to identify what you are afraid will happen if, for example, you do not take her. If she will have an accident and you will have to clean it up, you may decide that getting up is preferable. That is a practical consideration. But if the concern is that she will scream when your husband offers to help, the question becomes whether you can tolerate her displeasure.

Screaming in the middle of the night is certainly unpleasant and may wake the household. Nevertheless, sometimes a little disruption is worth tolerating rather than continuing the same pattern night after night. If screaming no longer produces the result she wants, I would expect that, after some repetition, she will be less likely to continue. I cannot know from your letter exactly how this would work in your home, but the possibility that she will be unhappy need not determine your decision.

Sometimes it's simply a matter of feeling unable to bear another person's unhappiness or disappointment. A child sulks, or a spouse expresses dissatisfaction, and we feel compelled to fix it. It is not pleasant to live with someone who is upset, particularly when they tell us that their unhappiness proves we have failed them. But sometimes we need to recognize that we cannot provide what they want, even though they will be disappointed.

You can make a decision to no longer feel codependent while remaining gentle and caring. People become defensive or offensive, or make things personal, all too soon. You are not trying to hurt your daughter or make her unhappy; you are deciding and communicating what you can reasonably provide. The fact that she is unhappy with your decision does not, by itself, mean you have to change it.

The underlying message might be: "I understand that you want me to take you. I love you, but I am very tired, and Tatty can take you now." You can continue showing your love through a hug, a kiss, a story, and the other ways you care for her. A three-year-old does not need a long explanation. Much of the clarity needs to be in your own mind: you can love her and still decline this particular demand.

Adults have their ways of tantruming too, but at times it's nothing more than an expression of, "If you cared about me, you would do this." It is tempting to prove that we care by giving in. Yet some people are shown love and care throughout the day and still use the one request that cannot be fulfilled as evidence that none of it counts.

A man recently described how he was bending over backward to help his wife. When he could not come home early or did not complete something exactly as she wanted, she accused him of being selfish and uncaring. They went for counseling, where the focus became getting him to do still more and to demonstrate more feeling in what he did.

He tried to become even more considerate and available, but reported that the situation grew worse.

If we keep taking responsibility for someone else's happiness, they may come to expect that from us—and see every disappointment as our failure. What was needed in that situation was greater confidence on his part and more reasonable expectations on hers, rather than simply more effort to please her. You can make it clear that you care, even when you cannot do what is being asked.

For you, the application is much simpler. Your daughter's insistence does not have to make you doubt your care for her. But make sure to continue expressing that care in other ways while remaining clear about what you are willing to do.

What does "normal" mean?

Your question about age is important because it raises the distinction between what is normal and what is reasonable to accommodate. There are extremes that should not be treated as normal, but there is also plenty in between that should not be called extreme just because you would prefer something else. Some behaviors are clearly far outside what most people would do, and whether they involve children or adults, they should not be treated as ordinary difficulties. The opposite mistake is to take something within the ordinary range and describe it as outrageous.

A wife may feel that her husband gets up too late because her father always rose earlier. That does not necessarily make her husband's schedule unreasonable. At the other extreme, sleeping through half the day while someone else covers all the responsibilities should not simply be explained away as normal. Between those situations, there is room for different schedules and preferences. Just because you don't like something doesn't necessarily mean it isn't normal.

The same applies to children. A four- or five-year-old still using a pacifier at bedtime may strike one parent as unacceptable, while another is willing to allow it for longer.



An eight-year-old who does not sit nicely throughout the Shabbos meal may disappoint his parents, but he is not the only child who finds that difficult. You can work on a behavior without treating it as evidence that something extraordinary is wrong.

Applying this to the example you describe, a baby waking a parent at night is clearly different from a twelve-year-old routinely requiring a parent to accompany him to the bathroom. Between those extremes, there is room for variation. A three-year-old or four-year-old waking her mother for help is not in itself extraordinary.

"Normal" does not mean that every child does it, but it certainly happens within ordinary family life. Yet "normal" doesn't mean that you have to accommodate it indefinitely. And more than one response can be considered "normal" too. One mother may be comfortable continuing to help, while another wants to work toward greater independence. Your daughter's request does not have to be abnormal before you can decide to change how you respond.

If you choose to continue because you are comfortable helping and expect her to grow out of it, that is reasonable. If you want to change the arrangement, I believe you can work toward that by responding differently and doing so pleasantly. But the decision should reflect your judgment rather than fear of her reaction.

Being confident as a parent

In some situations, sudden changes overnight work best. At other times, small changes, communicated appropriately and carried through with confidence and consistency, may be a better way forward for both you and your child. You can decide what you are willing to accommodate without asking your daughter, through her reactions, to determine what you must accept.

I'll end with an interesting *vort* I saw in the name of Rav Shlomo Heiman, the *rosh yeshivah* of Torah Vodaas. He pointed out how Hagar is described as the maidservant together with her son. He connected this to a parent becoming a servant to the child. When fear of a child's reaction governs every decision, a parent can lose the confidence to parent.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: TOLDOS 5787

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